



# The Best Medicine

Finding out I had HIV forced me to look at myself in the mirror and make real changes.

June 24, 2024 By Ian Bicko

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I found out I was HIV positive in February 2017 in my last semester at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. Ironically, I was taking a class on global health and chose HIV/AIDS as my research topic. I chose it before I knew about my own status. Life is funny. The research was good because it forced me to confront some realities and learn my new normal. I think I reached a place of acceptance earlier than I would have otherwise.

It took at least nine months to find out that I was living with HIV. In the spring of 2016, the guy I had been seeing decided to cut off our relationship. I thought we were exclusive. Meanwhile, I had a three-month research/mission trip to Haiti planned that summer.

Within my first couple of weeks in Haiti, I experienced what I now believe to have been a pretty terrible experience with seroconversion. I was very, very sick for over a week, but I assumed I had some form of malaria or food poisoning. I eventually recovered, and the thought of having been exposed to HIV never crossed my mind. Fast-forward to early 2017, and I was experiencing mild symptoms. I generally got tested regularly but hadn't since I returned from Haiti.

I'll never forget receiving the news. I don't know how long I sat in that cramped room at the Mobile Public Health Department. The windows were frosted glass, and I just stared at the blank window for I don't know how long.

They called me and told me to come in to go over my results. I knew that wasn't good because usually, I got a quick phone call to tell me my results were clear. I sat down, and I was handed a yellow piece of paper: syphilis. My heart dropped; I was so relieved. I didn't see the pink piece of paper that the man still held in his hand.

As I look back, I feel like, in many ways, the day I was diagnosed is when I began living. Before my diagnosis, I was barely out of the closet. I didn't like myself. Hated myself even. I didn't know how to reconcile my sexuality with my faith. I was a very scared and, honestly, depressed person.

Being Christian and a closeted gay man made me an excellent liar. I was never actually myself in my first 25 years of life. Finding out I had HIV forced me to look at myself in the mirror and make real changes.

I found volleyball, and it ended up being the best medicine. At first, it was where I could be myself. I could forget about my diagnosis. I could be competitive and work out all of my emotions. I've continued to pursue beach volleyball to the highest level I can, and I've gotten pretty far. Recently, I was in a tournament where I beat a U.S. Olympian and multiple top 10 players in the country—my best showing. Seven years ago, I never would have thought I'd have reached this level of success.

I'm finally in a place where I want to combine my sport with my advocacy work. I'd love to use my sport as an avenue to reduce HIV stigma. I'm currently based in New Orleans and serve as an ambassador with a local initiative called Bounce to Zero. I've loved being involved locally, but I'm ready for what's next— whatever it is.

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